

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**THE TRINITY IN BALANCE:
ISRAEL'S STRATEGY FOR VICTORY IN THE SIX DAY WAR**

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INTRODUCTION

In the early morning hours of the 5th of June, 1967, the tiny besieged nation of Israel launched virtually its entire Air Force in an all-or-nothing gamble to guarantee its survival. During the preceding six weeks the world had watched while Israel's enemies had imposed a blockade, massed troops on borders, and openly broadcasted their intentions to "cut the Jews' throats."¹ In a little under three hours, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) destroyed the Egyptian Air Force on the ground. Before the day was out, the IAF had completely crippled the Syrian, Jordanian, and Iraqi air forces. The resultant unchallenged air superiority that the IAF secured during those first fateful hours ensured that Israeli Defense Force (IDF) ground operations against the Arabs on all fronts would be unhindered by enemy air and thoroughly supported by the IAF. When Israel suspended offensive operations on the 10th of June, after just six days combat, the IDF had effectively destroyed the ground forces of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. The immediate threat had been eradicated, and Israel occupied the Sinai, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights as buffers against future aggression. In effect, the entire strategic paradigm of the region had been transformed. The sheer magnitude of the Israeli victory stunned the entire world, including the Israelis themselves.²

Countless studies and articles have examined the reasons for Israel's stunning success in the Six Day War. Most of these works understandably point to the operational and tactical brilliance of the Israeli military as the primary reason for victory. Although the IDF's courage and tactical brilliance ensured incredibly successful execution on the battlefield, Israel's national strategy in dealing with the crisis engineered the ultimate

¹ Howard M. Sachar, *A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 625.

² Donald Neff, *Warriors for Jerusalem: The Six Days That Changed the Middle East* (New York: Linden Press/Simon & Schuster, 1984), 276-300.

victory. That strategy exhibited a thorough understanding by Israeli leadership of the very nature of war itself as an instrument of national policy. Carl Von Clausewitz believed that the nature of war was defined by the interaction of what he called a “paradoxical trinity” comprised of reason, passion, and chance.³ These elements of Clausewitz’s trinity were in critical balance for Israel on the eve of the conflict. The single-minded dedication by all the actors (government, people, and military) which Clausewitz said shaped his trinity served to optimize Israel’s military power. Israel then wielded that power in a surprise offensive strike against a masterfully selected enemy center of gravity to achieve vital national objectives.

The Trinity

Carl Von Clausewitz was arguably the most influential theorist ever on the subject of warfare. Although his masterpiece, *On War*, was not a completed work, many scholars agree that Chapter One of Book One had been polished to the point where he considered it finished and therefore accurately conveys his thoughts on the nature of war.⁴

Clausewitz said that, “War is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case. As a total phenomenon its dominant tendencies always make war a paradoxical trinity...”⁵ The first element of the trinity he describes as “primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force” and he explains that this element of the trinity “mainly concerns the people.” Clausewitz describes the second element as “the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam.” This second element, according to Clausewitz,

³ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, First Princeton Paperback, 1989), 89.

⁴ Ibid, 642-646.

is primarily the realm of “the commander and his army.” Finally, the last element is war’s “element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.” Clausewitz explains that this final element should be the concern of the government because “the political aims are the business of the government alone.”⁶

Defining the relationship between the elements of his trinity, Clausewitz says “the three tendencies (elements) are like three different codes of law, deep-rooted in their subject and yet variable in their relationship to one another.” He also insists that any theory on warfare must maintain “a balance between these three tendencies, like an object suspended between three magnets.”⁷

In order to examine the balance between the elements of the trinity as they relate to the 1967 Arab/Israeli War, the discussion will be framed by the actions of the three groups Clausewitz thought were “most concerned” with each element-- the People, the Military, and the Government. Because of the way the crisis develops, however, it makes sense to change the order. First, the Israeli government’s handling of diplomatic efforts to solve the crisis as “the voice of reason” will be detailed. Then the “passion” of the Israeli people’s unparalleled determination to survive as a nation will be considered. And finally, the performance of the Israeli military as the shapers of “chance and probability” in the prosecution of the war will be thoroughly examined.

The Israeli Government

In early 1967 Israel had enjoyed almost a decade of impressive and uninterrupted economic and political achievement. Israel’s relationship with its Arab neighbors at the start of 1967 did not seem to be noticeably deteriorating. Egypt’s Nasser continued to

⁵ Ibid, 89.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

make occasional Pan-Arab overtures toward his dream of eradicating the Jewish state. Although Syria seemed to be hopelessly unstable under an endless parade of ultra-nationalist military officers, Egypt continued to be the foremost threat to Israeli security. In the east, Jordan remained relatively quiet under the moderate King Hussein.⁸ While frequent border clashes with the Syrian backed Palestinian Fatah reminded Israelis they were not truly at peace, they had come to appreciate the absence of war.

Things took a dramatic turn for the worse, however, on the 15th of May, Israeli Independence Day. Responding to alleged Israeli threats to Syria (reported to him by the Soviets), Nasser mobilized his army. Then over the next several days he evicted United Nations troops from the Gaza and Sinai and deployed three divisions with over 600 tanks into the Sinai toward the border with Israel. Israel's Prime Minister Eshkol sought to appease Nasser during a speech before the Knesset, "I wish to repeat to the Arab countries....we do not contemplate any military action...We have contemplated no intervention in their internal affairs."⁹ But Nasser was reveling in his role as leader of the Arab world, getting swept away by his own rhetoric. On the 22nd of May he declared the Gulf of Aqaba and the Strait of Tiran closed to Israeli shipping. This action was illegal under international law, guaranteeing freedom of navigation, and represented a mortal economic threat to Israel. The Strait of Tiran was the conduit for 30% of Israel's oil and represented its only shipping access to Asia and East Africa. Israel had fought in 1956 to secure access to the Gulf of Aqaba; this blockade was an act of war, it could not be allowed to stand.

⁸ Sachar, *History of Israel*, 615.

⁹ Ibid., 625.

Prime Minister Levi Eshkol had come to power in Israel primarily on the strength of his domestic programs, but his more restrained and accommodating approach toward the Arabs was extremely controversial, especially with old war horses like Dayan and Peres.¹⁰ Also compounding Eshkol's credibility problem in dealing with the Arabs was the fact that he was the first Prime Minister in Israel's history with no military service experience.¹¹ Perhaps because of this lack of martial experience, he was committed to seek and rely on international support for a diplomatic solution. Over the next nine days, Abba Eban, the Israeli Foreign Minister was dispatched to Paris, London, and Washington to implore the strongest western powers to back Israel in some meaningful manner. But, although moral support seemed abundant in Washington, no concrete assistance was forthcoming from the U.S., Britain, or France—all committed by both international law and Trilateral guarantees to maintain freedom of navigation in the Tiran Strait. So on the 1st of June, Eban reversed himself in the Cabinet, siding with the generals' appeal for a preemptive strike.¹² Convinced that diplomatic options had been exhausted, Eshkol accepted the advice of his closest military and civilian advisors and recommended war to his cabinet. The formal decision for war was made on the 4th of June.

Eshkol has been criticized for indecisiveness and an unreasonable commitment to finding a diplomatic solution. Some of this criticism may be warranted but, in the final analysis, his government exercised sublime Clausewitzian "reason" when they finally resorted to warfare as an instrument of national policy. The lengthy diplomatic effort nearly caused the military to miss the optimum strike window, but it also guaranteed that

¹⁰ Yair Evron, *The Middle East: Nations, Superpowers, and Wars* (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1973), 68.

¹¹ Ilana Kass, Ph.D., interview by author, handwritten notes, National War College, Washington, D.C., 25 October 1999.

¹² Neff, *Warriors for Jerusalem*, 131-181.

America would not oppose the strike, and that world opinion would greatly favor Israel.¹³

The greatest achievement of the Israeli government, however, as the agent of reason was to define the character of this war. As Clausewitz said, “The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish...the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.”¹⁴ The entire Israeli nation knew that this would be a just war for survival.

The Israeli People

The Israeli people were accustomed to brash statements by their Arab neighbors which constantly and faithfully called for the destruction of the Jewish state. Since the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1964, that group had openly stated their goal “to obtain the objective of liquidating Israel.”¹⁵ The more radical, Syrian backed Fatah (Arab Liberation Movement) called for—and attempted to carry out--a “people’s war” of resistance, sabotage, and terror within Israel and advocated “a policy of scorched earth for Palestine.”¹⁶ By late May, 1967, these pronouncements had become more than just saber rattling machismo put out sporadically after failed border raids. Nasser had managed to unite the Arab world against Israel. Large hostile forces were massed on every Israeli border, seemingly poised for a coordinated strike. It appeared to the Arabs and to the world that Israel would indeed finally be crushed. When the Palestinian commander in the north was asked what would happen to the Israelis after the

¹³ Ibid., 190-196.

¹⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, 88.

¹⁵ Sachar, *History of Israel*, 619.

¹⁶ Ibid., 620.

inevitable Arab victory he replied, “Those who survive will remain in Palestine. I estimate that none will survive.”¹⁷

These bloodthirsty remarks, martial slogans, and other thinly veiled genocidal threats against Israel were widely published and absolutely galvanized the Israeli people. By the night of the 23rd of May, when Nasser had imposed the blockade, Israel was in the process of total mobilization. Two hundred fifty thousand reservists were called up to augment Israel’s standing forces of just fifty thousand.¹⁸ Streets were deserted, public places were empty, and school hours were cut in half so that Israeli children could deliver the mail. Private citizens dug shelters and ready-made graves. People suddenly paid their taxes early, and money and gifts of all types poured into the Defense Ministry. The mood of the population shifted from worried apprehension to absolute determination to survive. The predominant feeling was not really nationalism, but rather a collective resolve to protect the family of Israel. The “never again” commitment—an enduring legacy of the holocaust—became the supreme motivator.¹⁹

This resolve to survive as a nation and a people is the purest form of Clausewitz’s element of passion. This is the righteous and violent motive that focuses power when a nation resorts to war. In Clausewitz’s own words, “The more powerful and inspiring the motives for war, the more they affect the belligerent nations and the fiercer the tensions that precede the outbreak, the closer will war approach its abstract concept, the more important will be the destruction of the enemy, the more closely will the military aims and the political objects of war coincide, and the more military and less political will war

¹⁷ Ibid., 634.

¹⁸ Neff, *Warriors for Jerusalem*, 194.

¹⁹ Kass Interview.

appear to be.”²⁰ Reason had directed Israel’s decision for war, passion would focus its power. Now Israel needed military genius in execution to overcome chance and probability on the battlefield.

Israeli Defense Forces

Clausewitz believed that the element of “chance and probability” inherent in warfare always makes it to some extent a gamble.²¹ But he also believed that military genius in the commander could help skew the odds in his army’s favor. Clausewitz defined military genius loosely as “a harmonious combination ...of intellect and courage.” He then described the relationship that must exist between these two “indispensable” qualities: “first, an intellect that, even in the darkest hour, retains some glimmerings of the inner light which leads to truth; and second, the courage to follow this faint light wherever it may lead.”²² In the dark days before the Six Day War, Israeli military leadership exhibited a true genius for war. They molded and shaped chance and probability to favor their nation. Faced with imminent attack from overwhelming enemy forces, Defense Minister Dayan, and IAF Generals Hod and Weizman resolved to boldly strike first and destroy their enemies’ ability to fight.

Clausewitz said that in planning the “total defeat of the enemy...the first principle is that the ultimate substance of enemy strength must be traced back to the fewest possible sources, and ideally to one alone. The attack on these sources must be compressed into the fewest possible actions—again, ideally, into one.” He called these

²⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, 87-88.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

²² *Ibid.*, 102.

sources of power “centers of gravity” and went on to explain that “the second principle is: act with the utmost speed. No halt or detour must be permitted without good cause.”²³

Dayan, Weizman, and Hod instinctively knew that the Arabs’ most vulnerable centers of gravity were their respective air forces. They also knew that for the attack to succeed, maximum surprise would have to be achieved. The IAF had devised extensive plans for attack against potential enemy airfields starting in the early 1960s. Weizman and Hod planned to attack Egypt with the first several waves, then tailor subsequent attacks to the other Arab adversaries based on their reaction and bomb damage assessment. The plan was extremely detailed to include staggered launches with over-water routes timed so that all the IAF planes arrived on their targets at exactly the same moment. On the day of the actual attack, the time-over-target was chosen to coincide with the end of the first Egyptian training period so that most of the Egyptian fighters would not have fuel to get airborne and engage the Israelis.²⁴

Clausewitz believed that surprise and deception (he called it “cunning”) were valuable martial concepts in the abstract. “We suggest that surprise lies at the root of all operations without exception....”²⁵ The fact that he thought surprise was very hard to achieve in practice was undoubtedly due to the character and conduct of warfare during his lifetime. But for the Israelis in 1967, surprise was absolutely critical. The Israeli commanders vastly enhanced their chances of achieving surprise by using an off-the-shelf plan, and by cutting the time between decision and execution to almost nothing. The foresight to develop this plan in advance is another clear indicator of genius on the part of the IDF generals.

²³ Ibid., 617.

²⁴ Kass Interview.

²⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, 198.

The Israelis also had an extensive deception plan to hide the impending attack. The world will probably never know the full extent of that effort, but Moshe Dayan's first press conference as Defense Minister just two days before the attack offers a glimpse. Appearing a little rattled he declared, "At this moment, we are more or less in a position of being a bit too late and a bit too early: too late to react with force to the closing of the Strait of Tiran, and too early to come to any final conclusions about the diplomatic efforts applied to this matter."²⁶

At 0715 on the 5th of June, the IAF launched Operation MOKED, the surprise pre-emptive strike against the air forces of Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Jordan. Virtually every airplane the IAF owned was launched.²⁷ In 170 minutes the first several attack waves destroyed 309 of Egypt's 340 combat aircraft and rendered most Egyptian airfields unusable. In the afternoon, the IAF turned north and east. Thirty Jordanian jets (that nation's entire Air Force) and fifty-nine Syrian fighters were wiped out on the ground. Finally, a long-range attack was mounted against the Iraqi base at Habbinayah, which produced ten more piles of flaming debris.²⁸ Although the IAF lost twenty-six planes to anti-aircraft fire, they had essentially won the war. The incredible success of Operation MOKED guaranteed air superiority and close air support for IDF ground operations for the remainder of hostilities. The fighting continued for five more days, while IDF armored and infantry forces captured the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights. But after MOKED the result was never in doubt, Israel had won a stunning victory.²⁹

²⁶ Sachar, *History of Israel*, 638.

²⁷ Kass Interview. Dr. Kass noted that the Codename MOKED has a dual meaning in Hebrew, it can mean "focus" or "funeral pyre."

²⁸ Neff, *Warriors for Jerusalem*, 203-204.

²⁹ Sachar, *History of Israel*, 640-661.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the tactical skill of the IAF and the IDF were indispensable to Israel's victory in the 1967 Six Day War. But the overall success of the Jewish republic's grand strategy was due to an extremely solid understanding of the nature of war as an instrument of national policy. The elements of Carl Von Clausewitz's trinity were in rare balance within the threatened state throughout the crisis. Prime Minister Eshkol's insistence upon exhaustive diplomatic efforts to solve the problem ensured that the ultimate decision to resort to the military instrument of national power was just, reasonable, and accurately reflected the policy of his government. The Israeli people, spurred by the ultimate motivation of survival, focused the complete passion and power of the nation on the task at hand. And finally the military genius of the Dayan, Weitzman, and Hod shaped chance and probability to favor Israel in battle. The strength of each of these actors and the balance between the elements of the trinity they represent produced one of the most stunning strategic victories in the history of warfare. Unfortunately, the strength and balance were fleeting. Israel failed to heed Clausewitz's warning that "even the ultimate outcome of a war is not always to be regarded as final. The defeated state often considers the outcome merely as a transitory evil, for which a remedy may still be found in political conditions at some later date."³⁰ For the Arabs, the remedy lay in a surprise attack of their own--just six years later.

³⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, 80.

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